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INCOHERENT ARTS AND THE PRACTICE OF DOCUMENT (1882-1893)

The last exhibition of Incoherent Arts took place in 1893. However, Alphonse Allais retroactively presented three of four pieces from 1883 and 1884 displayed during the Incoherents' exhibition as late as in his 1897 *April Fools' Day Album* which features mainly "monochromes." It is true that only three titles are registered in the Incoherents' catalogues: *First Communion of Anemic Young Girls in the Snow*, *Tomato Harvesting by Apoplectic Cardinals on the Shore of the Red Sea*, *Great Pains Are Silent*. It was retroactive as well when in 1904 - long before Yves Klein - in an article signed "Aesop Jr.", printed in *Le Sourire*, Allais established the term "monochrome" to describe pieces created with the use of one color only. This very text from 1904, which content seems to have been overlooked, marks the beginning of the monochrome's genealogy. Considering the analysis scheme of Alphonse Allais's work presented here a starting point, it is easy to understand the role which documents – prints – have played in the history of Incoherent Arts and their reception up until now. In this article I am analyzing publications where certain documents were printed (daily newspapers, exhibition catalogues, entry cards, bills, posters, etc.) throughout the history of the artistic group known as Incoherents. The group which used to consist of over six hundred artists and presented more than a thousand pieces during their seven exhibitions organized in Paris between 1882-1893 exists in our collective memory nowadays, despite the great volume of its artwork, solely thanks to archives. Paradoxically the group members ignored all administrative conventions and classifications in power at that time. They held in disregard rules settled by the Academy of Fine Arts and adopted a different, seemingly simple one: "Show an exhibition of drawings made by people who cannot draw." Incoherent artists created many innovative pieces, anticipating the most avant-garde artistic forms of the XX century;

they were artists of a new kind – people of different professions. To present some examples of the few humoristic masterpieces I would like to mention *Feet* by Henri Gray, sculpted in a piece of gruyère cheese, or *Venus de Mille Eaux* (Venus of Thousand Waters which pronounced in French sounds the same as Venus de Milo) – a plaster copy of the Greek statue overlaid with bottled mineral water etiquettes. The ephemeral artistic practice was bound to result in dematerialization of Incoherent works; what remains are no more than a dozen of original pieces. Thus, these are documents of all types that allow one to analyze some of Incoherent works' meaning, reveal the Incoherent artists' intentions and deepen one's knowledge concerning this still rather obscure artistic movement. For many years it was thought nothing more than a farce, a group of people making "insignificant jokes," now however, we have discovered that Incoherents were closely connected with avant-garde movements of their day, such as naturalism or impressionism, though, they parodied those. Ridiculing everything including themselves they criticized the bourgeois social and political reality. Thanks to press releases we managed to establish that their first exhibition, with no catalogue or poster, took place on 2nd August 1882, on the day when the parliament passed a law concerning morality image. Thanks to documents, which we continue to discover, it is now known that the movement was far more complex than it may have primarily seemed. The radical contempt for classical academic drawing situates the group next to other avant-gardes of the late XIX century, its critical perspective questioned the culture of "good taste" as well as the middle-class, institutionalized notions concerning beauty. Incoherents pioneered many avant-garde artistic forms that flourished in the XX century, though particularly – that is what we claim – their attitude towards the relation between art and non-art anticipated the dada movement.

